

Ford Emporium - Father of Department Stores

The old Ford Store on the "Plymouth Road" in Duxbury (Tremont St. in the Millbrook section) dated back to 1826, when Daniel Webster used to buy his rum and groceries there. Duxbury lost one of its landmarks when this historic store — said to be the first department store in the U.S. — was burned in 1921.

It had been owned by the Ford family since it was established by Nathaniel Ford & Son in 1826. Used as a trading center, it was leased to J. P. Boyle when it burned to the ground at 1:45 a.m. on Oct. 13.

Almost Total Loss

Conditions were ripe for a historic tragedy. The store was heated by 2 wood stoves, and its timbers were saturated with oil and other inflammables which had been stored there for years. There was practically no fire insurance, thus it was almost a total loss. Boyle said both fires were out when he closed up at 6 p.m. the night before. Nobody has ever determined the cause of the fire.

Among irreplaceable objects destroyed was Dan Webster's saddle, which he used when he rode over to the store from his home less than 2 miles away in Marshfield. Also burned were some of his clothing and the old records of the store which included Webster's account with the storekeeper.

The building, 100 feet long and a story and a half high was built of handhewn timbers, wooden pegged. One window on the second floor, a millinery parlor and a hat factory, had 2 panes of real Sandwich glass. Originally established by Nathaniel Ford to deal in English and West Indian goods, it had for years been the largest store in New England and the center for trading activities in imported goods for the eastern part of the U.S. Its business boomed at the time of Clipper sailing ships, which carried the American flag into every corner of the globe. Goods imported from all over the world came for the most part in Ezra Weston ships, King Caesar, as he was known, was then the No. 1 shipowner in the U.S.

Country's First

Known as "The Father of Department Stores" the old Ford Emporium was the first in this country to sell and display various commodities separately. In boom years it did an annual business of \$200,000. Tourists came from

Florida, Texas and California to see the place. It was highlighted in guide books and in historical narratives, largely because of its associations with Dan Webster, who did most of his shopping there. His accounts, with his hat, clothing and saddle were on exhibition when the store burned. In an old iron chest that had not been opened for 45 years until a few days before the fire, were found many interesting ledgers of the 1880's.

The fire was discovered by a dog owned by Win Delano, who lived on Crab Island on land originally granted his ancestors by the Pilgrims. The dog woke Mrs. Delano, who notified the fire department. Fire Chief H. E. Merry, enroute from New Brunswick, read about the fire in the *Boston Herald* the following morning. (It was his first vacation in 14 years.) One

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man who helped fight the fire was the late William Redmond of Bay Rd.

Before the Fords bought the place in 1826 and operated it under the name of James T. Ford & CO., it had been owned and operated since 1779 by a man named Harlow.

Since no railroad reached Duxbury until 1873, for many years the Harlow store, twice a year, transported all its goods by its own packets from Boston to Duxbury Beach. There it was picked up and transported a mile or so to the store.

Still in existence are many of the old books of the Harlow concern, including the first account book with all the entries legible. The amount of rum consumed in those days was impressive. According to the entries in the ledger, every customer ordered a plentiful supply of rum with each order of groceries.

An 1826 Entry

In 1826 Joseph Simmons brought 4 gallons of molasses for \$1.35; 14 pounds of sugar, \$1.61; one gallon of New England Rum, 38 cents; 2 pairs of shoes, 98 cents; 2 papers of needles, 14 cents; quarter pound of tobacco, 5 cents. In 1926 you could buy a gallon of rum for 38 cents and a pair of shoes for 50 cents.

In 1827 Cyrus Churchill paid 6 cents for 2 glasses of wine and John Oldham paid 38 cents for 4-1/2 pounds of sage cheese at Old Ford Store. Eleazar Harlow, in preparation for the 4th of July, invested 20 cents in a quart of West India rum and 25 cents in a quart of Holland Gin. Jacob Weston and Benjamin Cushman bought hats. Jake paid \$3.75 for his; Ben, known as a contemporary dandy, paid \$7.

Dan Webster, who liked to hang around Ford's Store, often helped handle boxes and bales. Here's one legend told in Duxbury that concerns him:

"Take a hold, Mr. Webster, give us a lift, will ye?"

"Certainly," was the reply; and Daniel Webster tilted his high beaver hat on the back of his leonine head and helped the storekeeper hoist a box of Havana sugar into the store.

Goods Sold

Old Ford Store sold logwood, plows, aloes, flaxseed, hay cutters, Epsom salts, whale oil, camphor, elm bark, tents, rugs, chrome yellow, nuts, pepper, brimstone, wigs, pimento, white glue, nutmegs, tapioca, shells, wax, night caps, shoes, candles, pills, nails, powder and shot, codfish, dress goods, fish hooks and hoopskirts.

The inventory included East Indian and Oriental luxuries shipped in Ezra Weston packets (at one time 25 ships were being built in various yards in Duxbury for King Caesar).

You could buy colored china-ware imported from Hong Kong, brocades from Canton, spices from the East Indies, and tea from Japan. You could buy gin from Jamaica and oranges from the West Indies.

No wonder the store attracted such notables as Adelaide Phillips, the great opera singer whose summer home was next to the Webster estate in Marshfield.

The store was a gab center. Just outside its doors folks gathered to discuss the latest political developments. On "Sabbath Eve," Jake Brewster, a wandering minstrel, would play his violin. "Jake was

purty near as handsome as my hound," an oldtimer said, "but fiddlin' got 'em all." Nancy Alden, then the belle of Duxbury, said of Jake: "He is cross-eyed, bowlegged and redheaded, but I love him madly."

The 1921 fire was the most tragic that ever hit Duxbury.

Oldest Store?

(Here is an editorial that appeared before the fire in the *Boston Post* in 1921. —Ed.)

The ancient and honorable town of Duxbury claims possession of the oldest department store in the U.S., located on the main shore road between the town and Marshfield. And it certainly bears evidence of extreme age. Some put its birth back in the late 17th century; its records, however, date only to 1826; it is evidently older than that.

However, the claim of the Duxbury establishment to being the oldest department store in the land needs verification. Of all country stores, the modern emporium is merely an enlargement and glorification of the ancient rural place of barter and purchase. The U.S. is dotted with these well stocked shops where everything from plows to neckties is carried, although in recent years the competition of the great mail order houses has put many of them out of commission, more's the pity. It is sad to see a picturesque and useful institution like the country store vanish from the earth.

But to return to the Duxbury establishment, Duxbury folk will have to prove that theirs is the oldest country store in New England before they can be said to have made out a case as to priority in the department store business. Can they do that?